

The Goodness of God

b) Explain what is meant in the Bible by the phrase 'God is good'.

Christians see the goodness of God as one of his main attributes. God is thought to have a character, much like humans and Christians describe God in many different ways, for example as a father, a just judge or a warrior etc. However the most important label to be applied to God, especially in the Old Testament is his omnibenevolence.

Firstly, God's goodness in the respect that he demonstrated his love in creating humanity; Secondly his readiness to forgive, but also punish man justly throughout time and lastly the fact that God's laws (the ten commandments) were designed for man's benefit. Of course we must first distinguish between the two types of good. First there is moral good, where a person or thing is good because it does moral acts – it leads a moral life. For example Mother Theresa was a moral person. Then there is goodness as a quality. For example Cristiano Ronaldo is a good football player, but this does not necessarily make him a good person morally.

The goodness of God is first shown in his actions as a creator; In Genesis 1-3 God created order out of chaos by ten commands. The Jews liked order as chaos was seen to be evil. In the Seven Day Creation story God's goodness holds the forces of evil at bay. Each act of creation is seen to be good. "And he saw that it was good" (Genesis 1: 10). The end result of God's creation was the Earth and mankind. Everything created was made for mankind to take stewardship upon, and nothing existed purely out of coincidence. So not only is God morally good and requires humans to be good, but God's creation is also good. This makes God a good creator. This creation was made specifically for mankind to enjoy. This is commemorated by observing the Sabbath (seventh day/Sunday) as a day of rest, since God rested on the seventh day after six days of creating. In the ancient times and Jews today this is seen as an example of God's goodness because it means rest from hard work once a week. "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." (Exodus 20:8) This is good as it is an example of God being morally good in instructing humans to do what is best for them. It shows that God would like man to love God and obey God in return for all he has done for them. God is goodness personified and as mankind was created in the image of God. (Genesis 1:27, "God created man in his own image.") This tells humans that they are required to be good, as good as God.

God's goodness also includes the will to punish, so that goodness is combined with justice.

The most memorable demonstration of God's willingness to punish is in the case of Noah's Ark. God was displeased with the obedience of man and sent a great flood so that he could start afresh. He then showed his readiness to forgive mankind by making a covenant with Noah to say that he would never destroy mankind ever again. Disobedience by the Jews is always followed by punishment from God. "punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me." (Exodus 20:5) This is because

the Jews believed in corporate responsibility for sin. To have just one sinner in a community meant the entire community would become sinful, so it was up to the community to take responsibility for the good conduct of everyone in the group.

God makes covenants throughout time and God's goodness is shown through these as he never gives up on man but continues to forgive them. God wants what is best for man in the hope that man will return to God and live according to God's holy law.

God's final covenant was the sending of his son Jesus Christ to the world. Jesus being born for mankind and dying for mankind is seen as one of God's greatest sacrifices. Through the Divine Exchange, Jesus repented Adam and Eve's sins and allowed mankind the chance of life after death with God.

God is shown to be a good God who cares for his people. He intervenes in nature to perform mighty acts to save the Jews from their enemies and lead them into the Promised Lands. At the time of Moses he rescues all the slaves from Egypt by sending the ten plagues and then parting the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to escape. "I (God) will completely destroy the Amekalites from the Earth." (Exodus 17:14). God is prejudiced towards his people; he does everything he can to protect them (The Walls of Jericho) and helps them fight off armies that oppose them. Hence why, the fighting in the Holy Wars was thought to be a justified action.

Exodus 20 brings about the giving of the Ten Commandments. Moses received these via direct revelation on the peak of Mount Sinai. These were guidelines given for the Jews to live by, designed for man's benefit. The underlying principle is that humans are to be good and being good means following the Ten Commandments. God's goodness demands that mankind worship only one God and nothing or nobody else "You shall have no other gods before me and you shall not make for yourself an idol." (Exodus 20: 3-4). These commandments show that God is the primary source governing how people should lead their lives because God is both morally and skilfully good. The Ten Commandments show man how to be good by giving strict guidelines. (Thou shalt not murder; thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not steal). This is part of the associated requirement for human good conduct. For example Lee Harvey Oswald allegedly murdered President Kennedy; this is breaking one of God's commandments. The commands are to be morally good, just as god is morally good.

Exodus 20 is an example of the Divine Command theory. Socrates once said, "Consider this question: is what is pious loved by the gods because it is pious or is it pious because it is loved?" Christians adopted this to become, "It is good loved by God because it is good or is it good because it is loved?" Basically this is what is good, good because God commands it or does God command it because it is good? The Divine Command theory states that things are good because God commands them; so the Ten Commandments are good because they are what God commands. So in response to the Euthyphro dilemma, in the Hebrew Scriptures what the Jews understand to be good is good because it is loved or commanded by God – not for any other reason. God is seen as the ultimate source of moral authority and should be obeyed unquestioningly. This means that God may use fear to compel

obedience in order to prevent the chaos that can occur when moral order is broken. "For God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you don't sin."

All these examples show that God is seen to be morally good and skilfully good, a God who is ready to combine goodness with justice through punishment in order to keep moral disorder at bay. Mankind is meant to respond to God's goodness by following his commands. God is seen to be a personality who sets high moral standards for his people. These moral standards were obtained through direct revelation.

b) "It is difficult to believe in a God who is perfectly good." Discuss.

There are many different reasons for why it is difficult for people to believe in a God who is perfectly good. Firstly there is the fact that humans are said to be made in the image of God, (Genesis 1:27). Therefore if humans possess bad or negative attributes then God himself must also have these. Two of God's main attributes in Christian philosophy are omnipotence and omnibenevolence. So, God is credited with what are ultimately human attributes. It is then not clear how a metaphysical being can exercise human emotions and attributes such as love and power. Of course it can be argued that God made mankind completely perfect, with his goodness but then gave them free will. Humans, just like God have the capacity to choose to be evil but while God doesn't; humans often do.

The difficulty of seeing God as omnibenevolent can also be seen in Exodus 20, where some of the commands God lay down seems to be immoral. For example, in verse 5 God describes himself as "for I the Lord your God am a jealous God." Then in verse 20 Moses suggests that fearing God can stop people from committing sins, but many philosopher would argue that if people do good just because they are scared then they are not doing good at all.

Moses also suggests in this verse that punishment or bad fortune can be a test from example. (One of the ideas discussed in the Book of Job; where Job is the subject of a wager between God and Satan.) Most Christians would say that a God, who tests us, for whatever reason, cannot be perfectly good. For example it cannot be right to test people by asking them to sacrifice their children (such as with Abraham and Isaac) even if God does command it. These problems in Exodus leave us with an ongoing problem today – how can a good and loving God expose mankind to the sheer amount of undeserved suffering that they experience?

The main argument for the non-acceptance of a perfect God, or even any God at all is the existence of evil in the world. There are of course two types of evil; moral or human evil and natural evil. Epicurus raised the point

"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is not omnibenevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Then where does evil come from?

Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him a God?"

There is an obvious tension between the existence of evil and God's attributes of being omnipotent and omnibenevolent. As Epicurus summed up, an omnipotent being would be able to get rid of evil and an omnibenevolent being would want to get rid of evil. So, God either does not have both of these attributes or there is no God. Maybe then, God is not perfectly good, but then why would Christians want to worship such a God?

Many philosophers have come up with various theodices (an attempt to justify God's righteousness in the face of evil) to explain why it might be better for God to allow evil to exist. There are two main types of theodicy. There are those which claim that God is both

omnipotent and omnibenevolent, but he allows evil to exist, because humans learn by making free choices between good and evil. Both Augustine and Irenaeus support this type of theodicy: Augustine believed that humans were born perfectly good but they and the Earth was gradually corrupted by Satan's evil; while Irenaeus believed that humans would gradually live up to God's goodness, they have to learn to become God's image. Both support the Free Will Defence and believe that evil is the absence of good not a power of its own. This means that humans also learn to love God as a free choice and learn goodness like self-sacrifice and sympathy when they see other suffering from moral and natural evil.

However, many people object that there is too much evil in the world and that the benefits humans gain from free will are not worth the horrors of Nazi Germany. For example the Russian novelist Dostoyevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, lists the various horrific things that happen to innocent children and concludes that the point of having freedom is not worth it. This also provokes the other debate of the difference between moral and natural evil. Free will can of course provoke human evil such as wars and murder but natural evil has nothing to do with people. How can a hurricane or tsunami be affected by human behaviour?

The free-will argument provides a counter to the above argument. The free-will argument denies that, 'by saying that while God abhors evil he allows it'. The free-will argument asserts that God's purposes for humankind cannot be achieved without allowing humans free will. God could not allow human free will without allowing for the possibility that they would choose to do evil. It goes on from there to say that 'His will is that they should freely choose...good' and that 'he is in no way responsible for the evil that there is.'

The second type of theodicy is those which claim that God is not all-powerful or perhaps not all-loving. For example Process Theology states that the universe existed before God moulded it and therefore he can only control matter that exists inside himself. Evil is a process within matter and therefore God cannot control it. Eventually he will be able to overcome evil and control matter but until then he can only help humans as much as he can. Many object that such a God would be too limited to worship properly.

So, to conclude, there are many examples of God's goodness throughout the Bible but it is difficult to believe in a God who is perfectly good because there are so many objections such as evil and severe punishment to the rules.